Independence in Algeria and Vietnam: A Comparative Study

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 At the end of World War Two, France was recovering from an occupation by Germany. It got back on its feet to find that the natives in its colonies were tense. Indochina was the first to cause major problems for France, and did so until France exited the area completely in 1954. Barely months later, Algeria became France’s new opponent, and this war went till 1962. This essay compares and contrasts four aspects of the independence movements:

1. how nationalism developed;

2. the revolutionary forces, their actions against the French and their support;

3. the actions and military force that France used to quell the rebellions; and

4. how France ceded colonial control.

It focuses on the times of the wars of independence from France, 1945-54 in Vietnam and 1954-62 in Algeria. These two wars are major episodes in decolonisation during the Cold War and were inspirations to other independence movements. Therefore, this essay will not examine the details of each battle but will attempt to understand the similarities and differences between those conducted on Algerian territory and those in Vietnam.

**Nationalism**

On August 19 1945, a few days after V-J day, Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnam Republic took over. Emperor Bao Dai had stepped down. On August 25 the Vietminh organised a huge popular demonstration wherein more than a hundred thousand Vietnamese people marched past the old French government buildings in Saigon. The Vietnamese were convinced they had won their independence at long last. (Shaplen, 3) Ho wrapped up the August Revolution by standing in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi and proclaiming the new republic. His declaration began with the words, “All men are created equal. All men have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” (Wintle, 42)

But France was not so willing to release its possession yet. France’s actions seemed almost to encourage Vietnamese aggression. At first, France was reluctant to give any concessions, then the Vietminh scored military successes against them and they gave into some demands. As the violence escalated, France liberalised the colony further until it pulled out completely. After France’s defeat by the Vietminh in 1948, they went to the table to negotiate the March 8 1949 accords. More local powers were transferred in 1951and 1952 after more failed military campaigns. (Shaplen, 77) The conditions at the beginning of Algeria’s revolt were similar to those of Vietnam’s. Algeria was France’s most important colony and for a long time it was very passive. But after World War One, a small number of Algerian Muslims took some political action. Like in Vietnam, these activists were French educated. And like in Vietnam, the French seemed to invite violence. The appeals of the moderates were spurned by the French, and by the time they decided to grant any concessions, there was a new generation of more radical nationalists demanding more. Their demands were also ignored and a third generation of nationalists grew, convinced that violence was the only way to gain the independence owed to them for so long. (Quandt, 2)

The Vietminh’s power was not dominant in the south like it was in the north. Other leftist and nationalist groups opposed its attempts to follow up on the success in the north. (Shaplen, 4) In the 1940s, the Vietnamese Communists felt quite alone in the world. The USSR was concentrating on Europe, the French Communists were “Frenchmen and colonialists first and Communists after.” (6) The British occupation troops threw the Vietminh out of many of the government offices in Saigon and then the French troops took over on September 23. Colonel H. J. Cedile, the new French Commissioner of Cochin China, tried to welcome the Vietnamese into the proposed Indochinese Federation and French Union, but the Vietminh were not interested. Cedile quickly destroyed the Vietminh government and killed some of those who resisted. (7) The Vietminh called a general strike and Saigon all but shut down. They continued to demand full independence and France continued to deny it them. On October 17 the Vietminh attacked the occupiers and were repulsed to the countryside. (8)

World War Two was a training ground for Vietnamese nationalists and strengthened the resolve of the radical Algerian political activists. French control of Algeria loosened during the war and the radicals found more space for political involvement. They also heard the Allies' talk of self-determination for the colonies and believed it meant a sooner independence for Algeria. (Quandt, 48) The would-be Algerian revolutionaries saw their neighbour Tunisia and Morocco fight for their independence and gain it. The liberals were appealing for reform without success and the radicals were unable to agree on a political program. (66) The Algerian elite rejected de Gaulle's progressive reforms in1944 as weak. They were similar to those set out in the Blum-Viollette proposal of 1936 but times had changed in 1944 and Algerians were more restive. (49) Right after the armistice in Europe, many Algerian Muslims saw their chance for independence. Tensions between Muslims and Europeans rose and culminated in a demonstration on May 8, 1945, when violence between the two groups brought swift and merciless repression from the French. They spent days hunting down Muslims with air force and navy until 100 Europeans and unchecked thousands of Algerians were killed. The French achieved their objective of breaking up the Friends of the Manifesto (of the Algerian people) and Freedom (AML) and imprisoning its leaders. This brutal force clearly had a hand in stoking the nationalist uprising that turned revolutionary in 1954. (51)

In 1950, once Ho Chi Minh’s regime was formally recognised by Russia and China, it initiated a propaganda campaign across Vietnam, including the south, to portray Ho alongside Stalin and Mao as one of the great world communist leaders. (Shaplen, 70) North Vietnam held a conference in February 1951 where it presented to the world the party’s platform of “A People’s Democratic Dictatorship, democratic toward the people, dictatorial toward the imperialist aggressors and reactionaries.” This platform including economic development and land reform policies. The Communist Party of Vietnam was clearly a political party and could no longer plausibly be labelled a band of ideological guerillas. (71)

Since the promotion of Syngman Rhee in South Korea, Bao Dai, the old emperor, scraped up by the US after World War Two, was seen more and more as a puppet. He was unpopular because he was not seen as able to grant Vietnam its independence. (74) France implemented the Pau agreement. It was more liberal than any other agreement before it but it still made the Vietnamese feel like second class citizens. (77) Not improving the situation, General Jean de Lattre, Commander in Chief of the French Expeditionary Forces in Indochina and High Commissioner, claimed to be in Indochina to protect it from Moscow and Beijing, and that France had no further colonial interest there. However, when he arrived in 1950, France still owned almost all the wealth in the area, including rubber plantations, mines, banks, shipping and most other industries. (80) All these outside impositions on Vietnam were to fan the flames of nationalism, which in turn fueled support for the cause of the Vietminh. And at least the Vietminh new who their leader was and what doctrine they were to follow.

Ferhat Abbas, a leader of liberal Algerians, who had spread the desire for more freedom for Algeria during the war, founded a journal called Egalite. Its main purpose was to spread the idea of Algerian nationhood and to promote the AML. The AML gained 500,000 adherents in a short space of time. (Shaplen, 50) There was still no real unity among the Algerian political elite, however. Political leadership was made up of various factions that could not form stable coalitions. (11) There was no agreement as to what the policies of an independent Algeria should be. Should it be a one party system? What kind of economy would it have? Should it be an Arab or a secular state? Should Algeria maintain close ties with France? The differences in answer to these questions sometimes depended on the cultural background of each political leader. (13) After Algeria won its independence in 1962 Ahmed Ben Bella came to power as the first president of the new republic with the help of a large and heterogeneous base of support. He tried to counter the demands of one group with those of the others, and resist the emergence of any single, dominating group. (174). This multiparty system and divided opinion was in stark contrast to Vietnam, where Ho Chi Minh had long been at the head of a personality cult and one party system that dominated the nationalist movement.

**The Revolutionaries**

Tran Van Giau headed the southern faction of the Vietminh, which attacked the Trotskyists and other nationalist forces and killed a number of their leaders. (Shaplen, 5) As France was setting up its government in Saigon, the Vietminh was still brutally crushing its opposition among the resistance movements against the French in order to establish itself firmly as the dominant resistance force. The guerillas in Cochin China operated in groups of ten or twelve. They carried old French or Japanese weapons, especially hand grenades, and used hit and run tactics to attack French detachments, outposts, cafés and restaurants. (15) It is likely that Ho’s intentions were similar to Tito’s in Yugoslavia. While he was certainly a communist (and the Allies treated him with the same blanket policy with which they treated all communists), it is possible he was trying to set up a unified Vietnam as a bastion of nonaligned communism in Southeast Asia as a counterweight to the threat of Chinese penetration. He also tried to remain diplomatic in his approach to France and the US. (28)

The Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) did not have the same tight party doctrine that enabled it to survive the transition to independence. (Quandt, 87) One group decided that the only thing left to secure Algeria’s independence was an armed revolution; and on November 1, 1954, they announced the formation of the National Liberation Front (FLN). (67) The violence had already begun with a few coordinated acts of violence on the night of October 31. (88)

By 1949, North Vietnam was being run by hard line Communists. By 1950, there were at least two Vietminh military training camps in Yunan. Young conscripts received indoctrination and basic training, and veterans went to study modern warfare. China was also sending weapons to the Vietminh in increasing numbers. (Shaplen, 69) As the Ho Chi Minh leadership propaganda campaign waged, so did war against the French. The Communists won a series of victories in Autumn 1950 by defeating the French at their forts along the border with China. The symbolism of these attacks is not to be disregarded, and as General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote later, these victories “marked a new phase in the evolution of our long resistance.” (60)

In 1954, Algeria was a different story. But the tables turned. So they allied with the organisers to make up for their failings. But this lack of organisation was still felt in a crucial area: military leadership. The original solution to their narrow range of skills was to collectivise decision making. Each zone commander was all powerful in his region. They thus allied with the politicians in 1956 to get broad-based popular support. However, the lack of clear leadership was to have repercussions after the revolutionary war ended in 1962. (96)

Ben Bella was beginning to appear the leader but was not only blamed for many military failures at the Congress of Soummam in 1956, he was also suspected of arranging a backdoor deal with France. (100) Ben Bella was in a tussle with Abane Ramdane over leadership of the FLN, weakening the Front’s unity. This fight was a manifestation of a later conflict that took place after France had been expelled. (106). By mid-1957, neither the revolutionaries nor the politicians, alone or in alliance, were in a position to lead the war against the French. New leaders emerged from the ranks of the military and the intellectuals. (107) “The material, logistical, numerical and locational advantages enjoyed by the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu do not alone account for Giap’s victory, or its impact…. What made it possible was the wider context of nationwide insurrection and nationwide participation.”(Wintle, 90) The Vietminh had the active support of the great majority of the Vietnamese population. The French could barely muster up support from Vietnam’s minorities. (54) Moreover, the triumph of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 had implications for Asia and beyond. A new communist bloc formed in East Asia and Ho was no longer internationally isolated. In January 1950, Ho announced himself the leader of the sole legitimate government of Vietnam. China and the USSR both recognised the Vietminh that month. (63-4) The FLN, in the same fashion, received support in the form of equipment, supplies and safe bases outside the main combat zones from outside patrons in Tunisia and Morocco and to a lesser extent Libya and Egypt. In 1960, the USSR began supplying military hardware to the FLN. (Shrader, 168) This aid helped even the score.

**France’s Reactions**

In 1951, de Lattre lined up small fortresses, each within sight of its nearest neighbours, along the perimeter of the Red River delta. This line was to be called the De Lattre Line. This defence proved harder to break than that which Giap broke through in his first major victory in 1950 that had called de Lattre to Vietnam. (Wintle, 67) After his forces were pushed past the de Lattre line, the general died. His replacement was not the visionary de Lattre was. (73-4) As the Cold War was intensifying, the conflict was seen progressively more as a battle between capitalism and communism, and thus was progressively internationalised. (74-5) Attacks on French targets continued, and the US began to call for its aid money to be spent on training an indigenous South Vietnamese army and for the subsequent withdrawal of the French forces. (79) By the Geneva Conference of 1954, the US contribution to the war effort in Vietnam totalled $3b. (97)

In Spring 1953, there were sixty Vietnamese battalions under Bao Dai, totalling 150,000. France wanted to inculcate the armies with nationalism and make them an independent fighting force, but actions were impeded because about three quarters of their officers were French. (Shaplen, 81-2) It is believed by some that de Lattre could not have won the war but could have stopped it when he saw it was hopeless; and in this they liken him to de Gaulle, who put a stop to the war in Algeria. (83) The French learned much from their efforts to arm natives and took different approaches to Algeria.

When the uprisings in Algeria began, France’s priority was the restoration of order. To do so required five main tasks: protect persons and property; prevent the spread of the rebellion; control the lines of communication; secure urban centres; and destroy rebel forces in the field. In spite of France’s commitment of the majority of its available troops, the needs of the operations perceived necessary to end the insurrection were never met.(Shrader, 38-9)

The French had many of the same disadvantages in Algeria as they did in Indochina. Their enemy was elusive and determined; it had popular support; the French government was unstable and indecisive; there was a lack of troops and materials; and critically, there was no grand strategy for winning the war. But the main difference, according to historian Charles Shrader, is that France had distinct advantages in mobility and counter mobility. Had political instability in France been taken out of the equation, France could well have won the war in 1962 or earlier. They had advantages in Algeria they did not enjoy in their battle with the Vietminh, such as Algeria’s relative proximity to France for military support and communications. France also had control of transportation routes and used helicopters to a great degree where it did not have such a luxury in Indochina. (Shrader, 1-2)

After the Congress of Soummam, there was trouble for the FLN. In October 1956, four of their top leaders were kidnapped by the French. Urban terrorism in Algiers was met with massive retaliation by the French. The Coordination and Execution Committee fled to Tunisia. And the general insurrection they had hoped for did not occur. Until 1958, revolutionary troops could hide in the areas along the Moroccan and Tunisian borders, but in 1958 France completed a set of barriers made of mines, electronic devices and barbed wire to seal the eastern and western borders of Algeria. This prevented troops from entering (or returning) from Tunisia or Morocco but it also prevented the French from chasing Algerian revolutionaries into those countries as well. (Quandt, 127) In contrast, the Vietminh, led by Vo Nguyen Giap, were creating a very different spatial dynamic by conducting operations in Laos at the same time as fighting the French. A big part of Giap’s strategy was to use Laos as a second theatre for the war and pave the way to Dien Bien Phu. (Wintle, 75)

**Departure**

France could not stand to let Indochina become independent. They always intended with the Pau accords that Indochina would remain under a measure of French control in the French Union; whereas by the time de Gaulle was making similar accords with Algeria, he made membership in the Union optional. (Shaplen, 77) In late December 1950, French morale was at a low and the conflict in Vietnam was being called the dirty war. Prominent French people were speaking out against French involvement in Indochina. (79)At the end of the Korean War, China was sending supplies and advisors to the Vietminh; and “from October 1953 the Vietminh began turning up the heat.” (Wintle, 80) General Henri Navarre was the commander of the French Expeditionary Force after de Lattre. Navarre decided to place what was to be the final French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, in between Laos and the Viet Bac, to limit Giap’s options. (81) The Vietminh overran the French military positions one by one as they closed in on Dien Bien Phu from all sides. On May 4, 1954, Giap delivered a final, devastating blow to the French garrison. 7000 French soldiers died and 8000 were captured and marched to Hanoi. France’s role in Vietnam was over and the US fully assumed the job of trainer to South Vietnam.

By mid-1958, France’s victory in Algeria appeared all but certain. France had the advantage in technology, strategy and mobility. (Shrader, 233) However, France had other problems. Algerian forces had been virtually eliminated; and yet “they had managed to sow doubt in the minds of many Frenchmen and political leaders in France about the desirability of imposing a French solution to the Algerian question.” (3) While the FLN were committed to Algeria’s independence till death, France was growing war weary. Moreover, it was in political disarray at the end of the Fourth Republic. The Minister of National Defence reduced the number of troops in the field by 6,500 in February 1959. In 1960, Charles de Gaulle stepped in and decided to end the drain of resources to the Algerian battlefield. He organised a ceasefire in March 1962. The nationalists gained total independence for Algeria on July 3 of the same year. (233)

**Conclusion**

There are many similarities in the four categories for comparison and contrast, the development of nationalism, the revolutionary forces, the French forces and France’s withdrawal, and many differences as well. France’s actions inspired revolt and encouraged it by giving in to demands as violence increased. It met violence with violence but had to contend with the vast majority of the native population. However, its departure in Vietnam was due to military defeat and in Algeria for reasons of domestic politics. These two wars were not the end of trouble for either country but they marked the end of colonial rule in their countries and were victories for freedom that inspired other anti-imperial wars around the world soon after.

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